

HABITATS

Habitats within New River Gorge

Overview

A habitat is the place where an organism lives, its home address. A habitat is the area where one or more animal species live within a given environment. It is the place where an animal finds what it needs to survive.

A livable habitat offers a tolerable climate, a varied terrain, ample space, and a dependable supply of food and water. It has safe places for feeding, playing, hiding, resting, and raising young. A habitat, in effect, is the sum total of an animal's everyday needs.

Examples of habitats in New River Gorge might be the riverbank of the kingfisher, the hardwood forest of the chipmunk, or the riverbed of the flathead catfish. Habitats change for some species; for example, the larva of a dragonfly spends its early life on the river bottom before emerging as an adult dragonfly to live above the river.

Another example is the salamander, which swims in the water as a tadpole only to crawl around on the forest floor the rest of its life.

A habitat provides four things — food, water, shelter, and living space. It is important that these are found in the right amount and within an accessible location for any given species. If a shelter is too far from food and water sources, then it may not be used.

Living space is another important ingredient. Some animals can live close to one another, while others must live far apart. In either case, if they become too crowded, problems arise because of disease and competition for food, water, and living space. Therefore, a habitat must provide an ample amount of good quality food, shelter, and water — with enough space to prevent excessive crowding.

A species' job or function within its habitat is called its niche or "ecological niche." The niche is the role that the plant or animal carries out in its habitat. The niche of an organism involves the relationship to the place where it lives, as well as to other organisms living there. For example, the job of an earthworm is to feed on decaying plant and animal parts in the soil, and the role of the rabbit is to eat grass and leaves and be eaten by other animals. However, for a plant or animal to occupy that niche, the main ingredients of the habitat must be available in the right amount.



A scenic view of the New River.

National Park Service Photo



Food

A plant's or animal's food consists of any material that is taken into its body to provide energy for carrying out its daily functions. Food for a species must be of good quality and quantity for that plant or animal to survive or continue to live in a particular habitat.

Water

Water is essential to all life. Without water there would be no life. Water must be of good quality as well. Water is necessary for many purposes. It keeps cells in the body tissue alive; it is used for cleansing the body; it is vital to the production of food supplies; it also serves as shelter for some animals.



National Park Service Photo

A lake habitat

Shelter

The place where an animal lives is its shelter. It might be built, dug, burrowed, or found. For example, the beaver builds its lodge from tree limbs and mud, while the fox will find a small cave or dig a burrow. A shelter provides a place to eat, play, sleep, raise and care for young, get away from bad weather, and hide from predators.

Living Space

The area within which an animal normally must travel to secure its needs is called its home range. Living space is the amount of area that a species needs to find food and water, secure shelter, raise its young, and grow. Space for one species will be totally different from the space required by another. For example, a black bear may need an area several hundred acres in size to find enough food, but the squirrel may live its entire life within one acre. Space also determines the population of a species. If a species becomes overpopulated within the space available, that species' health and reproduction will be affected, resulting in the death of some members of the species or a lower number of births. Also, social patterns within species can limit the number of animals within a home range. Some species, such as Canada geese, tolerate many of their own kind whereas the red fox tolerates only a few other foxes close by.

New River Gorge National River offers a large variety of habitats for a biologically diverse group of plants and animals. Habitats range from the forest floor and old log habitat to the forest canopy of the ridge tops and mixed hardwood forest, to the riparian habitat of the river bank and floodplain, to the aquatic habitat of the river.

